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Can We Eliminate Labor Unrest?

By ROBERT W. BRUÈRE

EMLOYERS who want a stable labor force almost invariably prefer married men. Married men are steadier, they say. They are less capricious, their ears are not so keen to catch rumors of better jobs elsewhere or so ready to listen to the trouble-making agitator. The first answer to the question concerning the elimination of labor unrest is suggested by this preference of the employers. If you want to anchor the worker, pay him a living wage, not an individual living wage, but enough to keep him and his family in health and decency and comfort, enough to enable him to feed and clothe his children well and to give them a thoroughgoing education. The government has announced that the minimum comfort wage for an average American family is \$1,400. A national minimum wage of \$1,400 would be a good beginning toward the elimination of labor unrest.

COMPLEMENTARY EARNINGS AND WAGE SCALES

But any self-respecting American worker today wants to feel that he is his own man, that his job and his wage are free from the taint of his employer's beneficence, free from the taint of pseudo-charity. He wants to be in a position to command what his work is worth, so that he will not be compelled to force his wife and children into the factory to make both ends meet. Too many employers are in the habit of interpreting the family wage as meaning the total earnings of all the members of the family, rather than the wage paid to the head of the family alone. The country is dotted with human by-product industries, industries that exploit the labor of women and children compelled to go to work because the earnings of the father are inadequate. It is not to the best interest of a democratic community that the father should be forced to be a party to the exploitation of his wife and children. If they are to go to work, as under certain circumstances they may find it desirable to do, their earnings should be-

long to them as a family reserve for the luxuries that make up the amenities of life, and for insurance against sickness, for education and such holidays as all healthy-minded people should be free to enjoy at reasonable intervals.

LABOR UNIONS AS AGENCIES FOR ELIMINATING UNREST

In order to be free to command what his work is worth, the worker must have his feet on solid ground outside of the jurisdiction of his employer. And the only practical way in which he can secure this independent footing is by joining and energetically supporting the union of his trade or industry. A non-union man today is economically free only by accident; his union card is his only real insurance against economic dependence, against dependence upon the good-will of his employer for his chance to earn a living. Next to a guaranteed minimum family wage, the union is the most efficacious agency for the elimination of labor unrest. Incidentally, except in the case of the lower paid women workers, the union has been the most potent influence in the establishment of a family wage for its members.

The union performs another important function of the same nature. For the unmarried man and especially for the single man who has cut loose from his family ties, it is, even more than the church and the lodge, the substitute for the family itself. When a trade or an industry is well organized, the union carries the labor reserve for the industry and is generally, as in the coal fields and the photo-engraving trade and the needle industry, in a position to keep the employer supplied with a relatively steady flow of skilled men.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A PERSONNEL MANAGER

But a family wage and the influence of the union are not enough. One of the most fertile causes of labor unrest is the brutal and unnecessary monotony of work in the modern machine-equipped factory, mine or mill. Whether he is definitely conscious of it or not, a workman's nerves are gradually upset by dirty and slipshod shop conditions and by the monotony of the endless repetition of stupid processes. To eliminate labor unrest and so to reduce labor turnover, the enlightened employer will give his personnel manager equal rank with his sales and technical manager. In

any well-equipped plant, there should be a man of high intelligence and social imagination whose exclusive business it should be to select workers in accordance with their fitness for the jobs they are expected to fill and to vary their work so as to prevent the development of ennui, staleness and a vague sense of futile monotony. The personnel manager should be entrusted with the supervision of the cleanliness and physical upkeep of the shop, with the provision of decent toilet and washroom facilities, lunch room and all the human and domestic comforts which gave dignity to the workshop of the old home-staying guild craftsman. And the authority of the personnel manager in all matters affecting the health and comfort of the men should be coördinate with the authority of the works-superintendent over the strictly technical processes of manufacture.

FULL PLAY FOR THE CREATIVE IMPULSE

But again, mere physical comfort within the shop is not enough. Many plants reasonably well-equipped along housekeeping lines have found that the workers fail to appreciate the good things that are "done for them." A self-respecting workman does not want to have nice things done for him, any more than he wants to be beholden to his employer's beneficence for his job. He has an instinctive desire to participate in the control of the conditions under which he works and, again, to participate as a right and not as a favor. He wants to have an opportunity—though of course he has often not developed a conscious definition of his want—to exercise his creative instinct both in shop organization and in the improvement of the technique of his job. Many workers behave like clods untouched by the living breath of God, not because they are clods really, but because the entire organization of most modern plants conspires to snuff out the creative spark that is the universal inheritance of all reasonably normal men.

SCIENTIFIC MANAGEMENT AND LABOR UNREST

But does this not lead us directly to "scientific management," the Taylor system and all the rest? It is unnecessary to go into all the reasons why skilled workmen, and especially the workmen whom the unions have begun to socialize, hate "scientific management." The best statement of this problem which I know,

was made by the late Robert G. Valentine in a letter to one of Mr. Taylor's most ardent disciples:

In attempting to analyze the effect of time study on an industry, I believe it important to distinguish clearly between the use of time study for the purpose of analyzing a job and the use of time study for the purpose of setting tasks after a job has been analyzed.

In practice, time study today is made by the employer for the benefit of the employer, and only such benefit accrues to the worker as in the judgment of the employer is necessary to produce a result beneficial to himself. This is the utmost extent to which the worker can be alleged to share. On the other hand, as industry is at present organized, with the control of this matter in the hands of the employer, both the individual worker and all his fellows stand, both directly and indirectly, to lose in this matter:—because time study, together with the whole process of thoroughgoing analysis of jobs, tends steadily to reform the whole industrial process. Theoretically also this may be a completely excellent thing for society. Practically, however, it is on a certain stability in basic industrial organization, changing only from time to time and not existing as a perpetual flux, that the worker has heretofore been able to take his stand and win for himself the shorter hours of labor, the higher wages, the sanitary working conditions, and above all an attitude of growing, intelligent understanding and respect for him as a man on the part of the employer. All of which things would never in the world have come to the worker from the hands of the employers. These are things that only come to those who win them. It is perfectly clear to me, therefore, that the workers cannot wisely submit or consent to any industrial method like time study which tends so to shift the ground on which they stand under their feet, *unless* they have an actual share with the employer in creating new ground on which they themselves will be as strong as they were on the old. Under those conditions and under those only can they be expected to coöperate in the demolition of the old ground.

DEMOCRATIC ADMINISTRATION THROUGH JOINT INDUSTRIAL COUNCILS

If we are to meet the conditions suggested by Mr. Valentine, we shall have to devise a much more democratic administrative mechanism than any so far proposed by the organized employers or even by the organized workers of America. What seems to me the most promising approach to the problem stated by Mr. Valentine is that outlined by the Whitley Committee for the British Ministry of Reconstruction. The Bureau of Industrial Research, with which I am associated, has just published in a single volume reprints of all the Whitley Committee's reports and the record of the Joint Industrial Councils of England so far as they have reached this country. I may here quote a few sentences giving the gist of the Joint Industrial Council scheme.

In their first report on Joint Industrial Councils, the representative employers and trade unionists who composed the Whitley Committee recommended the following:

The establishment for each of the principal well organized industries of a triple form of organization, representative of employers and employed, consisting of Joint Industrial Councils, Joint District Councils, and Works Committees, each of the three forms of organization being linked up with the others so as to constitute an organization covering the whole of the trade, capable of considering and advising upon matters affecting the welfare of the industry, and giving to labor a definite and enlarged share in the discussion and settlement of industrial matters with which employers and employed are jointly concerned. . . . For trades in which organization is considerable but not yet general, a system of joint councils with some government assistance which may be dispensed with as these industries advance to the stage dealt with in our first Report.

Taking our first and second Reports together they constitute a scheme designed to cover all the chief industries of the country and to equip each of them with a representative joint body capable of dealing with matters affecting the welfare of the industry in which employers and employed are concerned, and of caring for the progressive improvement of the industry as an integral part of the national prosperity.

It is important to note that the Whitley plan as compared with what has come in America to be known as the Rockefeller Plan, provides for the representation of the workers through their unions which have their feet on independent ground outside the jurisdiction of the company.

SUBSIDIARY POINTS IN A PROGRAM TO ELIMINATE UNREST

There is no room in so brief a note as this to go into the bearing upon labor unrest of an effective system of employment exchanges, of plans for the proper housing of workmen's families, of coöperative buying and selling, of the dozen and one equally important subsidiaries to the main planks of a modern program for the elimination of labor unrest. Most of them will be found stated far more authoritatively than I can state them in the Report on Reconstruction made to the British Labor Party by its extraordinarily competent sub-committee and reprinted for distribution in America by *The New Republic* of New York. The most important immediate requirements, as I see them, are,—the national establishment of the minimum family wage for all adult workers, male and female; the extension of the principle of organization in industry, both on the side of the employers and the workers; the constitutionalizing of industry through the development of joint industrial councils on a national as well as upon a district and local community basis; and the addition to these councils, as to the staff of each manufacturing plant, of experts in human psychology whose entire business it should be to satisfy the healthy craving of the workers for decency, cleanliness and light in the

places where they spend the greater part of their effective lives and to inspire both employers and workers with the fundamental human worth of creative workmanship. When industry itself becomes the great school of creative workmanship and of service to mankind through production freed from the curse of sabotage as now practiced by employers quite as extensively as by wage workers, we may hope that labor unrest will begin to disappear.